

The Ship of the Desert

From Burckhardt's *Travels in Nubia*.

Of all animals under the sun, perhaps the very ugliest is the camel; but life in the deserts of Africa and Arabia could not go on at all without the constant presence of this clumsy-looking creature. Some African tribes keep camels entirely for the use of their milk and flesh; and it is noticeable that these animals are much shyer and more timid than their brothers in Syria and Arabia, who will instantly come trotting up to any fresh camel that appears on the scene, or obey the call of any Bedouin, even if he is a stranger.

In general, the camel is merely employed as a beast of burden, and from this he gets his name of the 'ship of the desert.' Like other ships, he sways from side to side, and his awkward motion is apt to make his rider feel very sick, till he gets accustomed to this way of travelling. Camels are wonderfully strong and enduring animals, and can stow up water within them for several days, besides having an extraordinary power of smelling any water or spring that is far beyond the reach of man's eyes. These qualities are naturally very valuable in the burning deserts which stretch unbroken for hundreds of miles, where everything looks alike, and the sun as he passes across the heavens is the traveller's only guide.

Partly from fear of warlike tribes, which wander through the deserts of Arabia and Nubia, and partly from the help and protection which a large body can give, the one to the other, it is the custom for merchants and travellers to band together and travel in great caravans of men and camels. They try, if possible, to find some well by which they can encamp, and every man fills his own skins with water before starting afresh on his journey. More quarrels arise about water than people who live in countries with plenty of streams and rivers can have any idea of. One man will sell his skinful to another at a very high price, while if a traveller thinks he will be very prudent and lay in a large store, the rest are certain to take it from him directly their own supply runs short. Foods they can do without on those burning plains, but not water.

Some of these misfortunes befel a traveller of the name of Burckhardt, who left Switzerland in the opening years of this century, to pass several years in Africa and the East. After going through Syria, he began to make his way up the Nile, and even penetrated as far as Nubia, joining for that purpose a caravan of traders under the leadership of a Ababde—an Arab race who from the earliest days have been acknowledged to be the best guides across the desert.

Owing to the intense heat which prevails in those countries, the marches always take place in the small hours of the morning, and midnight seems to have been the usual hour for the start. Very commonly the march would continue for eleven hours, during which time the men were only allowed to drink twice, while the asses, who with the camels formed part of the caravan, were put on half their allowance. Sometimes a detachment was sent on to wells that were known to lie along the route, to get everything ready for the rest when they came up; but it often happened that the springs were so choked up by drifting sand that no amount of digging would free them. Then there was nothing for it but to go on again.

It was in the month of March that Burckhardt and his companions had their hardest experience of the dreadful desert thirst. The year had been drier than was common even in Nubia, and even in the little oases or fertile spots, most of the trees and acacias were withered and dead. Hour after hour the

travellers toiled on, and soon the asses gave out, and their riders were forced to walk over the scorching sand. Burckhardt had been a little more careful of his stock of water than the other members of the caravan, and for some days had cooked no food or eaten anything but biscuits, so that he had been able to spare a draught every now and then for his own ass, and still had enough to last both of them for another day. However, it was quite clear that unless water was quickly found they must all die together, and a council was held as to what was best to be done. The Ababde chief's advice was—and always had been—to send out a company of ten or twelve of the strongest camels, to try to make their way secretly to the Nile, through the ranks of unfriendly Arab tribes encamped all along its eastern shore.

This was agreed upon; and about four in the afternoon the little band set out, loaded with all the skins in the caravan. The river was a ride of five or six hours distant; so that many hours of dreadful suspense must pass before the watchers left behind could know what was to be their fate. Soon after sunset a few stragglers came in, who had strayed from the principal band; but they had not reached the river, and could give no news of the rest. As the night wore on, several of the traders came to Burckhardt to beg for a taste of the water he was believed to have stored up; but he had carefully hidden what remained, and only showed them his skins which were empty. Then the camp gradually grew silent, and all sat and waited under the stars for the verdict of life or death. It was three in the morning when shouts were heard, and the camels, refreshed by deep draughts of the Nile water, came along at their utmost speed, bearing skins full enough for many days' journey. Only one man was missing; but traders are a cruel race, and these cared nothing about his fate, giving themselves up to feasting and song, and joy at their deliverance.

Yet only a year later, the fate that had almost overtaken them befel a small body of merchants who set out with their camels from Berber to Daraou. The direct road, which led past the wells of Nedjeym, was known to be haunted at that date by the celebrated robber Naym, who waylaid every caravan from Berber; so the merchants hired an Ababde guide to take them by a longer and more easterly road, where there was another well at which they could water. Unluckily the guide knew nothing of the country that lay beyond, and the whole party soon lost themselves in the mountains. For five days they wandered about, not seeing a creature who could give them help, or even direct them to the right path. Then, their water being quite exhausted, they turned steadily westwards, hoping by this means soon to reach the Nile. But the river at this point takes a wide bend, and was, if they had known it, further from them than before; and after two days of dreadful agony, fifteen slaves and one merchant died. In desperation, another merchant, who was an Ababde, and owner of ten camels, had himself lashed firmly on to the back of the strongest beast, lest in his weakness he should fall off, and then ordered the whole herd to be turned loose, thinking that perhaps the instinct of the animals would succeed where the knowledge of man had failed. But neither the Ababde nor his camels were ever seen again.

The merchants struggled forwards, and eight days after leaving the well of Owareyk they arrived in sight of some mountains which they knew; but it was too late, and camels and merchants sank down helpless where they lay. They had just strength to gasp out orders for two of their servants to make their way on camels to the mountains where water would be found, but long before the mountains were reached, one of the men dropped off his camel and, unable to speak, waved his hands in farewell to his comrade. The other mechanically rode on, but his eyes grew dim and his head dizzy, and well though he knew the road, he suffered his camel to wander from it. After straying aimlessly about for some time, he dismounted and lay down in the shade of a tree to rest, first tying his camel to one of the branches. But a sudden puff of wind brought the smell of the water to the camel's nostrils, and with a furious bound, he broke the noose and galloped violently forward, and in half an hour was sucking in deep draughts from a clear spring. The man, understanding the meaning of the camel's rush, rose up

and staggered a few steps after him, but fell to the ground from sheer weakness. Just at that moment a wandering Bedouin from a neighbouring camp happened to pass that way, and seeing that the man still breathed, dashed water in his face, and soon revived him. Then, laden with skins of water, the two men set out for those left behind, and hopeless though their search seemed to be, they found they had arrived in time, and were able to save them from a frightful death.

Source:

Burkhardt. "The Ship of the Desert." *The Animal Story Book*. Ed. Andrew Lang. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1896. 248 – 252. Electronic.